

**CROSS-BORDER SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND AGREEMENTS:
An emerging global industrial relations framework?**

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International Institute for Labour Studies Geneva
International Labour Office Geneva

Published by the International Institute for Labour Studies

The *International Institute for Labour Studies* (IILS) was established in 1960 as an autonomous facility of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to further policy research, public debate and the sharing of knowledge on emerging labour and social issues of concern to the ILO and its constituents — labour, business and government.

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ISBN 978-92-9014-862-3 (print)
ISBN 978-92-9014-863-0 (web pdf)

First published 2008

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Copies can be ordered from: ILO Publications, International Labour Office, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland. For on-line orders, see www.ilo.org/publns

Preface

Many multinational companies have adopted corporate codes of conduct that have social provisions. In some industrial countries, in fact, most multinationals have such codes. Yet there is concern that these codes, important as they are, may not translate into actual improvements in workers' rights and employment conditions. Indeed, these private initiatives often lack the kinds of monitoring mechanisms needed to ensure that social provisions are implemented in practice. Moreover, these codes are primarily a management tool, and are not negotiated with workers. In this sense, they do not deal with the fundamental difference that exists between the scope of the firm – which operates on a global scale – and workers, whose voice is expressed in a fragmented manner, in the different countries where the multinational operates.

It is in this context that new initiatives have emerged, namely international framework agreements (IFAs), which constitute the focus of this volume. In contrast to traditional corporate codes of conduct, IFAs are instruments negotiated with global trade unions. The purpose of IFAs is to stimulate global social dialogue between the multinational and the representatives of workers – that is, both where the firm is headquartered and where it operates. IFAs also aim at promoting compliance with International Labour Organization core labour standards.

This volume represents the first comprehensive overview of IFAs. It covers the 62 IFAs that existed at the end of 2007 (compared with virtually none in the early 1990s and about 20 five years ago); provides a detailed analysis of how the agreements operate in practice; examines the extent to which IFAs pave the way for cross-border industrial relations;

looks at the legal dimensions of IFAs, including recent case law on the related issue of cross-border industrial action; analyses factors that explain why there are few IFAs in two sectors (textiles, clothing and footwear; and maritime transport); and explores the options for international policy action.

More fundamentally, the volume represents a major step in understanding the possibilities for developing cross-border industrial relations, and has garnered contributions from some of the top international experts in the field. Earlier versions of their contributions were discussed at a workshop of the International Institute for Labour Studies, held on 15–16 December 2006 in Geneva.

This is a fascinating project of the Institute, and one that calls for follow-up. The next stages will involve assessments of IFAs' impact on actual working conditions and of their effectiveness vis-à-vis the policy goals of the International Labour Organization.

Raymond Torres

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Table of contents

Preface	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Contributors	xv
Acronyms	xix
 Introduction	 1
<i>Konstantinos Papadakis</i>	
Data concerning IFAs	2
Historical benchmarks and factors contributing to the evolution of IFAs	5
Overview of chapters	7
References	10
 Part 1 History	 13
 Chapter 1 International framework agreements: A reassessment . .	 15
<i>Dan Gallin</i>	
Introduction	15
The original intention	16
Conclusions from experience	25
The first IFA	26
IFAs and codes of conduct	32
IFAs and European works councils	35
Conclusions: Back to the future?	38
References	40

Chapter 2 Transnational collective bargaining at company level: Historical developments	43
<i>Isabel da Costa and Udo Rehfeldt</i>	
Introduction	43
The origins of a transnational bargaining strategy at company level: World councils	45
The European detour to transnational collective bargaining at company level	51
European and global framework agreements in the automobile sector	56
Conclusions	61
References	62
 Part 2 Industrial relations	 65
 Chapter 3 International framework agreements as elements of a cross-border industrial relations framework	 67
<i>Konstantinos Papadakis, Giuseppe Casale and Katerina Tsotroudi</i>	
IFAs as industrial relations instruments from an ILO perspective	68
Definition and parties	69
Content	71
Machinery for monitoring and dispute settlement	73
Scope and binding character	77
Dissemination	79
Possible contribution of IFAs to the emergence of a cross-border industrial relations framework	80
Industrial relations	80
Law	82
Politics	83
Conclusions	84
References	86
 Chapter 4 International framework agreements in the context of global production	 89
<i>Nikolaus Hammer</i>	
Changing structures of global production systems	91
International framework agreements	95
Developing a tool for international industrial relations	96
Four levels of provisions	98
Implementation and monitoring	101

Conclusions: The challenge of buyer-driven value chains for IFAs . . . 105

References 107

Part 3 Legal dimensions 113

**Chapter 5 Legal dimensions of international framework agreements
in the field of corporate social responsibility 115**
André Sobczak

Introduction 115

Powers of signatories 117

 Signatories – employers 117

 Signatories – workers 118

Content 121

 Scope of application 121

 Rights conferred 123

 Monitoring procedures 124

 Legal value 125

 Legal nature 125

 Towards a legal framework 127

References 129

**Chapter 6 Implementation and monitoring of cross-border
agreements: The potential role of cross-border collective
industrial action 131**
Brian Bercusson

Introduction 131

Cross-border social dialogue in the European Union 132

Follow-up to the Commission’s Social Agenda 134

 The experience of European works councils 135

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